



BY MARY SHEARS ROBERTS.

V. BERTHOLDE.

LONG, long ago, in the barbarous days of the dark ages, there lived in the small Italian village Bertaguona the ugliest little dwarf you can possibly imagine.

His name was Bertholde, and he is described as having a large head, round as a football, eye-brows resembling bristles, while his eyes beneath them glowed like two torches. His hair was as red as carrots, his nose was flat. He had a wide mouth, and a short neck—in fact, it would be almost impossible to fancy the hideousness of this small but clever little rustic.

His parents had a large family, and very few of this world's goods. There were so many children to be clothed and fed that scarcely any attention was paid to their education. Indeed, in those days learning was so little thought of that it did not count for much, and Bertholde's sound judgment, ready wit, and clever speeches amply made up for his rough exterior and lack of culture and refinement. Next to the priest he was the most popular man in the village. On festival days and Sundays the peasants for miles around would flock into Bertaguona to listen to the witty sallies, pithy remarks, and entertaining stories of this truly remarkable dwarf.

He became such a favorite that when he spoke of going out into the world to seek his

fortune, his neighbors offered to contribute to his support in order to keep him amongst them. Bertholde, however, did not choose to be a burden upon his friends, and he persisted in his resolve to make a living elsewhere.

It took him some time to decide which way to go on this his first journey into the great wide world, so full of strife and adversity.

Across the lofty Alps in the Frankish dominions the wicked and cruel Frédégonde and the Merovingian kings were committing all kinds of atrocities, and our little friend wisely concluded to turn his steps toward the more peaceful Verona, where Alboin, King of the Lombards, had recently set up his court.

Some four years previous, this mighty chief with a huge mixed army had swept down from Germany into Italy, had conquered the latter country and established his kingdom there; and one fine day in the year of our Lord 572, the small traveler found himself before the splendid palace of this first of the Lombard kings. Bertholde stood for a time lost in wonder at the beauty of the building, the like of which he had never seen, and then he resolved to pay a visit to the proprietor of the wonderful mansion.

In those days the gates of the palaces were not defended by soldiers and guards. The people came and went as they pleased, and were free to lay their complaints and troubles before the throne.

Bertholde had always considered and be-

lieved that all men were born free and equal; and he never dreamed there was a person on earth with whom he might not converse quite freely. He, therefore, fearlessly approached the royal residence, ascended the broad stairs, traversed several lofty apartments, and astonished the court by suddenly appearing in the great hall where sat the king in all his glory. Without removing his shabby hat, the dwarf marched up to the throne, and, saying never a word, took possession of an empty chair by the side of his august sovereign.

The courtiers were as much surprised at his audacity as they were amazed at his grotesque appearance; but the Lombard chieftain smiled grimly upon the intruder, and inquired of him "what he was, when he was born, and in what country?"

"I am a man," replied the dwarf, whereupon the attendants went off into fits of laughter. "I was born when I came into the world, and the world itself is my country."

King and courtiers now began to realize that they had a shrewd little imp before them, and they commenced to ply him with questions of all kinds. The asking of conundrums was a sort of trial of wit to which sovereigns were much given at this period of history.

"What thing is that which flies the swiftest?" asked one.

"Thought," replied Bertholde promptly.

"What is the gulf that is never filled?"

"The avarice of the miser," was the ready answer of the quick-witted dwarf.

"What trait is the most hateful in young people?"

"Self-conceit, because it makes them unteachable."

"How will you catch a hare running?" inquired the king.

"I'll stay till I find her on the spit."

"How would you bring water in a sieve?"

"I'd wait till it was frozen," answered the dwarf, readily.

The king was delighted. "For so clever a rejoinder," he said, "you shall have from me anything you may desire."



"'I FIND, AS I SUSPECTED,' ANSWERED THE DWARF, 'THAT SOVEREIGNS ARE HONORED MORE THAN THEY DESERVE.'"

"Oh, no!" cried Bertholde, with a mocking laugh. "I shall have nothing of the sort. You cannot give me what you do not possess."

I am in search of happiness, of which you have not a particle. So how can you give me any?"

"How!" exclaimed the king. "Am I not happy on so elevated a throne?"

"Yes, you are, if the happiness of a man consists in the height of his seat."

Then Alboin referred to his kingly power and dignity, and the dwarf retorted with another mocking laugh; and when the king called attention to the nobles and courtiers about him, Bertholde with a sneer remarked: "Oh, yes, they cluster round your throne; so do hungry ants round a crab-apple, and with the same purpose — to devour it."

"Well said," spake the king, keeping his temper; "but all this does not prevent me from shining among them, as the sun among the stars."

"True, but tell me, shining Sun, how many eclipses you are obliged to suffer in a year? For the continual flattering of these men must now and then darken your understanding."

"For this reason you would not be a courtier?" inquired his Majesty, whose fingers began to play upon his sword in a threatening manner.

"Miserable as I am, I should be sorry to be placed in the rank of slaves," replied the dwarf. "Besides, I have not the necessary qualities to succeed in this fine employment."

"What then do you seek at my court?" asked the king in an angry tone.

"Something I have not been able to find there," answered Bertholde. "I was told that a king was as much above common men as a tower is above common houses; I find, as I suspected, that sovereigns are honored more than they deserve."

This was a little too much. The king lost his patience, and commanded the dwarf jester to leave the palace immediately or he would have him whipped out of court.

Just as he was leaving the room, however, two angry women entered, each anxious to lay her grievance before the king.

The matter in dispute was a crystal mirror which was claimed by both, but which had been stolen by one from the other. I am sure I do not know whether Alboin was a religious king; but it is quite evident he knew the story of the famous decision of Solomon, and meant to profit by it. He immediately ordered the

mirror to be broken into bits and to be equally divided between the two. One of the women said, "It is a pity so beautiful a mirror should be destroyed." Indeed, she was so quick to express her opinion that I am inclined to believe she, too, was acquainted with the judgment of the wisest of kings. Alboin immediately commanded the mirror to be delivered to her, and the entire court appeared to be delighted at this wonderful exhibition of wisdom. Alboin was so pleased with himself that he forgot his displeasure with Bertholde, and looked for approval at the dwarf, who had lingered to witness the result of the quarrel.

The ugly little face betrayed no emotion whatever, and Alboin was finally forced to ask the small man's opinion. "Am I not an exceedingly clever sovereign?" he inquired.

"Your excellent mightiness can only be said to be an ass," replied Bertholde, preparing to make a hasty retreat. History does not say whether Alboin considered this an answer to his query or otherwise, but he had the dwarf recalled, and Bertholde repaid him by soon playing a very shrewd and bold trick upon the court, as usual coming out victor.

From this time on the king began to take pleasure in the society of his ugly little friend. Bertholde showed such sound judgment that Alboin was wont to consult him in all grave and important affairs, and the poor misshapen peasant became a regular attendant at court, and was usually to be found at the king's side. The queen, Rosamond, however, disliked him thoroughly, and was jealous of his influence with her husband, and the women-in-waiting hated the sight of the little monster, as they called him.

Certain ladies of the court were eager to take a more active part in the government; and, being encouraged by the queen, at length became bold enough to ask that some of them should be made members of the king's council. Alboin was annoyed by the request; for, as he explained to Bertholde, in seeking the clever little man's advice, the husbands of these ambitious women were the generals who commanded his armies. To refuse, without good reason, might even cause a revolution.

Bertholde devised a plan by which the king escaped from the difficulty.

He bought a live bird in the market-place, and, in the king's presence, imprisoned the little captive in a rich casket. This casket, by Bertholde's advice, the king delivered into the keeping of the court ladies who wished to be councilors, telling them that it was not to be opened until the next day. "What it contains," said the king, "is a secret. If it should by any means be let out, you would see that the best interests of the kingdom required me to refuse your request."

The women were greatly impressed by these words; so greatly impressed that they at once began to wonder what the secret could be, and at last their curiosity became so great that the one who had the box in her keeping thought she would just look in for a minute — when, whir! — out came the bird, and away he flew through the window.

The next day the fair petitioners did not come to court to press their claim. For they saw that the king had made them show themselves unable to keep a secret.

For this crafty ruse, Alboin commanded his treasurer to give the dwarf a thousand crowns.

"I hope your majesty will not be displeased if I refuse to accept your gifts," replied Bertholde. "He who desires nothing, and has nothing, has nothing to fear. Nature made me free, and I wish to remain so; but I cannot if I accept your presents, for the proverb says 'He who takes, sells himself.'"

"How then," asked the king, "am I to show my gratitude?"

"I have heard that it is more glorious to deserve the favors of a prince and to refuse them, than it is to receive without deserving them," was the answer. "Your good will is more agreeable to me than all the gifts in the world."

While Alboin and his dwarf were thus talking there came a message from the angry queen, who was determined to be revenged on Bertholde for his mocking and too presumptuous pranks. The unfortunate little peasant had to contrive many artifices to escape the effect of her ill-will, for she too could invent schemes, and had courtiers and soldiers ready to obey her commands. The message was to summon the dwarf to her presence, and she

had four large, ferocious dogs placed in the court through which he had to pass. They were fierce beasts, ready to attack any one, but Bertholde, finding out what was in store for him, managed to procure a pair of live hares. These he threw to the dogs, and while they pursued the prey the dwarf escaped, and to the queen's surprise appeared before her, with his usual sarcastic smile.

She finally appealed to the king, and he, in order to keep the domestic peace and escape her importunities, forgot all his fine promises, and consented to have the poor little man hanged to a tree.

The ready wit of the dwarf did not desert him even in this extremity. He besought the king to take care of the Bertholde family, and to allow him the choice of the tree on which to die. Alboin readily agreed to the request and ordered a guard to accompany the executioner to see that Bertholde made his own choice. The trees of every wood for miles around were carefully examined, but our wise little friend objected to all that were proposed. The executioner and the guards became so weary of the fruitless search, that a message for relief was sent to the king.

By this time another question of importance had come before the throne, and the envoy found the great chief lamenting the loss of his able little counselor. Alboin was so delighted when he heard that Bertholde was still alive that he earnestly inquired the place of his retreat, and went in person to persuade him to return to court. Back in triumph came the dwarf amid the shouts of the populace. His brusque humor and good sense had made him popular with the people of Verona. He soon became the king's confidential adviser, and finally was raised to the position of prime minister.

After the king's death, Bertholde lived on to a good old age.

When he was seventy years old he made his will, a document full of dry wit and sage maxims. He had always said he preferred being poor in order that he might live in peace and tranquillity. A few fine speeches constitute his chief bequests to his two heirs, his wife Marcolfa and a son, who was under twenty-five when the celebrated dwarf breathed his last.